Columns
Horizons
Spirituality



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by Colleen Gibson

Columnist

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Tell me: What did you give up for Lent? Chocolate, swearing, time on your phone … The list is endless. Or maybe, you are someone who took something on. Are you practicing patience? Trying out a new prayer practice? Giving money to a favorite charity?

Whatever way you choose to mark this sacred season, there is something to be said for the ways in which we travel through the season of Lent. Lent, after all, is not about a destination. It is about intentionally making our way deeper into the heart of Jesus through the pathways of prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

These practices are the routes that draw us deeper by bringing us into contact with God, ourselves and our neighbors. Prayer, fasting and almsgiving, when practiced with intention, are meant to free us, lightening our load and directing our path. Yet, without a keen eye toward intention, it is these same practices that can easily devolve into an obstacle course of instructions and restrictions: "You can do this and you can't do that."

What if this Lent, instead of holding tight to a roadmap marked with tasks or rules, the invitation was to a more free-range traveler's point of view, to explore the art of accompaniment as it plays out in our everyday lives?

As Pope Francis writes in *Fratelli Tutti*, "we want to be a Church that serves, that leaves home and goes forth from its places of worship, goes forth from its sacristies, in order to accompany life, to sustain hope, to be the sign of unity… to build bridges, to break down walls, to sow seeds of reconciliation." If this is the church we want, then we must learn to be pilgrims who journey with others, who allow the spirit of the tasks we undertake — the spirit of the law — to draw us deeper into relationship with God and our neighbors.

A friend and canon lawyer once advised me, "Before anything else, consider the people before you. Get to know them. Come to love them. And then, walking with them, you will be able to find a way forward." In essence, he was saying that people have stories and it is only by entering into their stories and intertwining our own with theirs that can we truly serve the people of God.

The law, it would seem, seeks to serve the Gospel and not the other way around.

This fact becomes readily apparent when we turn to Jesus' interactions with rule sticklers throughout his ministry. These are the ones who were diligently trying to find a way to the final destination (or in some cases trying to trip Jesus up on the law of love he was proposing).

They are like the scholar of the law who asks, "Who is my neighbor?" after clarifying the call to love God fully and your neighbor as yourself (and prompts the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 29-37)). These folks want to know the parameters of following Jesus; they are the ones who find comfort in the security of details. They are the dear hearts that seek a plan even when it means missing the details of the important paths that guide the way in between.

In the same category is the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-30), who seems to have everything and to have done everything right and yet, still feels the absence of something more. When this pilgrim asks Jesus what more they must do, Jesus' reply is succinct: Sell everything and give it to the poor.

(How is that for prayer, fasting, and almsgiving?)

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Considering a call to accompaniment this Lent, it is the latter part of this command — "give it to the poor" — that piques my interest. Selling everything is a big ask. It requires complete and total surrender, but what's more is Jesus' call to give it to the poor. That act is the very first step in true following. It is more than making a donation — it is a call to accompaniment.

Take all that is *yours* and make it *ours*, Jesus is instructing. In this context, "giving" is an invitation to relationship, to search out those most in need and to join them in their poverty, to give oneself to accompany and be accompanied in the act of giving that lies at the root of genuine relationship.

In this way, those in need (and really anyone we truly accompany) become our teachers and our companions. Opening ourselves to their need exposes our own

neediness and at the margins of our meeting we are pushed not just to reach out but to unite our story with theirs.

Unified in this way, we mourn and laugh together, we seek justice and hunger for what will nourish together, and ultimately, we follow Jesus and find renewed hope and strength in the promises of God together.

In this togetherness, we accompany one another. We realize that the aid we offer one another is not a one-way street, just as no relationship can be. "True faith in the incarnate Son of God is inseparable from self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others. The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness," Pope Francis reminds us in *Evangelii Gaudium*. Tenderly walking with one another, we are evangelizers ever in need of evangelization.

Good News, it turns out, is for all. No one has exclusive rights as giver or receiver. In fact, if we see ourselves as both, we may just find that as we open ourselves to one another, we are more naturally open to God's activity in us and around us.

Such openness brings forth a vulnerability, equanimity and humility that predisposes us to mercy and grace. These qualities bond us together. They require us to take a long hard look at our motivations and intentions. As Australian artist and activist Lilla Watson famously attests, "If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." Truly, our salvation is bound up together.

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As we journey through the wilderness this Lent, we must realize that we cannot journey alone. As sure as we are called to accompany others, God is accompanying us. God listens and loves us, as my lawyer friend would say, intertwining the story of salvation with our own personal narrative. After all, we follow the Way of Jesus not just in reflecting on the stories of his life, death and resurrection, but by sensing that the Way — Jesus Christ — walks with us. Every step that we take in accompaniment with others is a step we take with Jesus. And just as we are one with others, we are invited into greater oneness with Jesus — coming to know God and know ourselves more fully in the holy act of accompaniment.

While accompaniment is meant to be part of our everyday lives, the 40 days of Lent give us a concentrated time to practice what we preach: to meet our neighbors, to put aside our ego and to unite with others in our need for and dependence on God.

At the end of these days, we will not have reached a destination, but with any hope, we will find ourselves further along the Way, more deeply embedded in grace and more fully disposed to give everything that we are and everything that we have to God and our neighbors. Ultimately, this is the call of accompaniment: that we might follow Jesus wherever he calls, giving all that it takes and taking on all that it requires, so that we might find our hearts walking hand in hand toward the transformative new life of Easter.

This story appears in the **Lent** feature series. View the full series.